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Mound Bottom: Shrouded in Mystery and Mist

By Randy Vincent and LinnAnn Welch

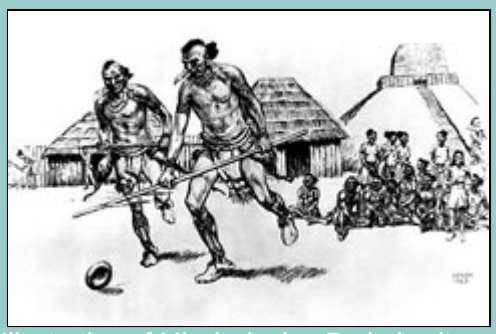

Illustration of Mississippian Period culture.
Courtesy of TN State Parks/Douglas Henry

High atop a jagged limestone cliff towering above the Big Harpeth River and Mound Bottom, adjacent to a road in south Cheatham County, is an ancient rock carving.

The carving is known in archaeological circles as a petroglyph. The Mace Bluff Petroglyph is the name that has been assigned to the carving. It depicts a mace or scepter used by the chiefs or high priests in special ceremonies and rituals.

Below the Mace inscription are two images that resemble teardrops. We will never actually know who carved the petroglyph, when exactly it was carved, or precisely what its cryptic meaning was, but archaeologists are sure that whoever carved it belonged to a Native American culture that reached its pinnacle in eastern North America between A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1300.

These societies were collectively known as the Mississippian Culture or the Temple Mound Builders. The person (or persons) responsible for the mace carving was more than likely an inhabitant of one of the two cities (or mound complexes) located across the river.

From a supernal perch high upon the Mace Bluff one is afforded a spectacular panoramic view. You can see the surrounding area and the once great city, now known as archaeological site Mound Bottom, looming in the distance surrounded on three sides by the serpentine river that snakes through most of Middle Tennessee.

The location was chosen precisely due to its natural fortification by the river on all sides but the ridge leading into it, which was protected by an earthen palisade, or wall, that was guarded by the keepers of the mounds.

All the Mississippian sites in eastern North America had various components in common. The culture developed and revolved primarily around riverine agriculture.

New strains of maize, beans, and squashes were developed and grown to produce surpluses for larger populations of people who concentrated in these new centers that were the focus of social, religious, and economic activities.

The more sedentary farming lifestyle gave the people time to develop socio-political hierarchy ruled by very organized chiefdoms and a priest system that developed very complex and elaborate religious ceremony. Great earthen platform mounds were constructed around open plazas, places for the elite to reside or for sacred temples to practice special ceremonies to help communicate with the divine.

Smaller mound complexes, farming villages, and hamlets were associated with the larger mound complexes and the people of a particular area showed their allegiance with the chiefdoms ruling the area. This high culture did not develop over night, but was the culmination of thousands of years of Native American existence upon the continent.

On a perfect October morning, Mound Bottom is shrouded in a misty, slow fog and the mystery that has surrounded the city since it was abandoned hundreds of years ago. The sudden shrill of a Red-tailed Hawk interrupts the silence as its cry pierces the crisp morning air. Soon a mob of cacophonous crows and raucous jays join in as if to warn the world that interlopers have been spotted among the scrub pines and contorted cedars along Mace Bluff. The autumnal sun slowly burns away the fog, revealing the solitude and splendor that is Mound Bottom. White-tailed Deer browse quietly on Sumac and Spicebush that grows along the edge of the bottoms. The hills are ablaze with the multi-hues of autumn in its full pageantry of colors.

Imagination is the action or faculty of forming mental images or concepts of what is not actually present to the senses. This action should not be attributed to the mind of a child, but can be a vital aspect to all ages, especially when interpreting an ancient site.

When experiencing a place like Mound Bottom or a culture forever lost in time, artifacts are crucial in the studies of their lives, especially those who did not leave a written and recorded history. Yet artifacts cannot explain everything. Ideas, words stories, etc. are not preserved like clay pottery, flint, and bone. The reasons why certain things occurred can only be left to speculation, hypothesis, and or imagination.

If you are inclined to use imagination, you can envision the city of Mound Bottom on a foggy October morning in the year A.D. 1327. An old priest is tired. His thin fingers are practically worn to the bone for he has been awake all night chipping away at the edge of a cliff that overlooks the once great city. The sacred bundle from his torch of gerardia and river cane bundles barely flickers giving off just enough light for him to finish the carving just before the great apportioner, the master breath, the great sun rises in the eastern sky. This is his offering to the gods, to the old ways, to the generations of his people who had inhabited these river bottoms for some 400 years. He was old and weak from the lack of sleep and hunger, for he had fasted and prayed for seven moons.

Before the old priest had started, he had taken a sweat and brewed the last dried leaves of the sacred holly to make the black drink so as to purge his body and mind and to properly cleanse him for this sacred undertaking.

He could not remember the last time they had gone on a trading trip to lands south

of the Big River. There they would trade flint, bundles of hard cane, feathers, pottery, and animal skins for the leaves of the black drink, the great conch shells, salt, and dried fishes. The shell gorget he wore around his neck was a happy reminder of a trading trip years ago when he was younger, just starting on the way of a holy man. He had traded pieces of flint and soft soapstone from the great mountain for the prized seashells and the long white feathers of the Great Egret.

Once back at home, he had fashioned the shell into a gorget he proudly wore around his neck. He had carved the image of a birdman in the shell.

He wore his best deer skin "matchcoat" and when he wrapped the hawk-skin feathers around his hoary head, he felt the power of the great soaring bird. His red-rimmed eyes now had the ability to see far and away. The world illuminated all around him. He made an offering of sacred tobacco to the Great Spirit. The acrid smoke slowly carried his prayers and incantations toward the sky father.

In his lifetime, he had seen many changes among the people of the river valleys. As a younger man when he had first taken a wife and embarked upon the journey of a medicine man, the people of the river valleys were filled with pride and contentment for their medicine was strong and they were deep-rooted in the beliefs of the temple mound peoples. The forests were plentiful with flocks of wild turkeys and vast herds of White-tailed Deer. Hunting came easy, but soon the people would forget and not respect the old ways of the animal master and take more deer than what they needed. Soon it was harder and harder to find the elusive deer.

Corn was the greatest gift from the gods, for it represented life to the people. Corn was the reason they had settled the rich bottomland. It was the source for the building of great cities and mounds. Their greatest ceremony and festival was the green corn festival. The corn grew tall, the beans, squashes, and melons produced many fruits. More and more people came to live and farm the river valleys. However, the last few years had not seen much rain, no clouds came to the parched land. The revered red cedar was all but gone, used into scarcity for palisade construction and other building purposes. The people grew hungry, they grew restless and they began to question the ways of the mound people. They did not have the spirit in them to construct the great earthen mounds. Warfare had become more widespread among the people of the valleys.

The old man knew in his heart the old ways were changing and they would not come back. The once great city was almost completely abandoned as a mass exodus of people had left to better lands to the south and across the mountains. They would never again construct the great temple mounds. They would never again return to their river valleys. The great city would forever be shrouded in the mystery and mist of time.

In reality, the town of Mound Bottom was occupied, according to radiocarbon dating, between approximately A.D. 700 and A.D. mid-1300 When first reported in 1804, it consisted of over 14 mounds, the number present in more recent times. In 1923, the Smithsonian Institution conducted some work at Mound Bottom, but mainly focused on the nearby Pack Site, a larger mound complex separated from it by a couple of miles and a palisade. Although some excavation took place in the late 1930s and early 1940s, it was not until the mid 1970s that much of the area was studied by modern archaeologists.

The site, about 100 acres, is surrounded on most sides by the Harpeth River. The

30-foot-tall platform mound was next to the plaza where civic functions and games were held near the temple atop its summit. Several mounds were for burial, but the largest cemetery was located west of the plaza. Interesting artifacts have been excavated at the site, including items made of copper, indicating trade with people of other regions.

Little do we think of another person's life or hardships in today's society, much less contemplate the struggles of our ancestors. Yet as we commute to work or traverse a road less traveled on the weekend, we pass by sites that once had thriving communities and ties that reached as far as the rivers and tributaries of the Mississippi and beyond.

Many of the same problems encountered today troubled lives in A.D. 1000, but for some reason, we as a society neglect any reverence for native ancient sacred ground. Most mound complexes were destroyed as cities such as Nashville were created and new superstores, schools, and strip malls yearly destroy features and cemeteries. We are fortunate that several have been spared from destruction by state ownership, city ownership such as the Fewke's Site in Brentwood, and caring family owners such as at the Pack Site near Mound Bottom. In an ideal modern world, no more existing sites would be lost as we as an advanced society realize value in things other than monetary.

(Randy Vincent and LinnAnn Welch have both studied biology as well has the cultures native to North America. Vincent owns Natures Way, a landscape design company specializing in native plants.)

Harpeth River State Park: A Natural Link to the Past

By LinnAnn Welch

The Harpeth River State Park, a collection of small state park properties in Davidson and Cheatham counties, is now a stand-alone Tennessee State Park with a manager and ranger to interpret and protect it.

For years, sites such as Narrows of the Harpeth, Mound Bottom and Newsom's Mill have been satellites of Montgomery Bell State Park with several of them also managed under the supervision of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology.

During the past year, however, the properties have changed management and are receiving even more hands-on attention from state park staff. In addition, Hidden Lake, the former site of late 1800s rock quarry and 1930s family resort/night club, has been opened to the public for the first time on a regular basis.

All of the sites are not only rich in ancient and recent history, but all are biologically diverse in wildflowers, trees, and wildlife. The link to them all (including Highway 100 canoe access and Mace Bluff) is the scenic Harpeth River.

For more information on programs or access information, contact Manager Jane Polansky or Ranger Billy Bilbrey at 615-797-6096. Or, contact Tennessee State Parks Archaeologist Bill Lawrence or the Tennessee State Parks biologist by calling 615-532-0001.

More information and history on Hidden Lake is available in the September/October

1999 issue of The Tennessee Conservationist. With the combination of state park staff and the Division of Archaeology teaming together to manage these sites, the public can enjoy the complexities of each without any harm to the cultural and natural resources that abound.

(LinnAnn Welch is the Tennessee State Parks biologist.)

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